

## Living with Grief during the Second Wave

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### Abstract

*One of the hard truth of life is 'grief'; it is universal. At some point in our lives, we have encountered grief in the form of losing a loved one, ending a long relationship, losing a business or job etc. The second wave of this pandemic is uncontrollable and more severe than the first wave. There are many unanswered questions we are grappling with, such as is it ok to repress the emotions that are surging in us and stick to the 'normal' routine? Does that make one heartless or insensitive? As a teacher educator, can one of the reasons for the low attendance of online classes is because my students or their family members are caught up in the mutated tentacles of this virus. How can a teacher handle grief of a student and grief at the workplace? This research article intends to answer these questions and provide insight to teacher educators, prospective teachers, parents and students. The only way around this pandemic storm is through it. Emotions that were well under control*

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*and on leash are tugging to be free. Let us learn to embrace grief as we make our way through this storm. Remembering and honouring the ones we have lost and holding on to ones we are blessed with.*

**Keywords:** grief, denial, anger, depression, teacher educators, death

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the hard truth of life is ‘grief’; it is universal. At some point in our lives, we have encountered grief in the form of losing a loved one. And there are shades of grief that has nothing to with death, like ending a long relationship, losing your home, losing a business or job etc. Death is a terrifying subject to talk about. We don’t prefer to discuss it until we are forced to. The world is experiencing the second wave of the pandemic, which has uprooted and dramatically upheaved our lives. This wave has hit hard in India, and we are facing shortages of basic facilities. We are now standing at a junction between the life we once knew, felt secure and safe, and at the same time looking forward to a prospect of a very new terrifying future. As our daily routine is disrupted, we are enduring extraordinary level of fear, anxiety, depression, trauma and losses.

There were many unanswered questions that the investigator was grappling with, such as why the second wave of this pandemic is uncontrollable and more severe than the first wave. Is it ok to repress the emotions that are surging in us and stick to the normal routine? Does that make one heartless or insensitive? As a teacher educator, can one of the reasons for the low attendance of online classes is because my students or their family members are caught up in the mutated tentacles of this virus. How can a teacher handle grief of a student and grief at the workplace? This research article intends to answer these questions and provide insight to prospective teachers, teachers, parents and students.

Everywhere we see, we perceive darkness. The darkness of the much-awaited reality, which is death. At times like these, we oscillate between extreme gloominess, sensitiveness and extreme indifference towards the situation. People who have lost a loved one are dealing with grief and bereavement. On the one hand, **grief** describes the response

to any loss, while **bereavement** is grief that involves the death of a loved one.

### **Understanding Grief**

Grief has been well explained by the seminal work of a Swiss-American psychiatrist named Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969). Her book “*On Death and Dying*” explains grief in five stages. Before dwelling on the five stages of grief, it is vital to understand how we are surrounded by certain myths regarding grief. Myths like: experiencing grief are the same for everyone; there is a right way and wrong way to grief, women grief more than men, we have to follow the stages of grief, there is one entry and exit point of stages, if you are not crying you are not grieving etc.

Everyone grieves; differently, it is personal. Grief is as unique as our fingerprint; how the stages will occur in someone’s life is also unique to them. Grief is neither linear, nor does it follow a schedule or a timeline.

According to Kübler-Ross (1969), not everyone will experience all five stages, and one may not go through them in this order (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). But these are the five common stages experienced by the grieving population.

### **STAGES OF GRIEF**

Kübler-Ross (1969), in her book “*On Death and Dying*” explained grief in five stages such as:

**1. Denial-** As grief is an overwhelming emotion; it is not unusual to respond to it by pretending the change or loss isn’t there. This is a common defence mechanism that gives us time to absorb and process the news gradually. It temporarily numbs us to the intensity of the situation till the emotions rise and resurfaces.

For example- *I am not infected; the test results are wrong. It is just a mild cold because of the change in weather. My company/boss will call me when the pandemic waves cool down.*

**2. Anger-** is like a masking effect where it is hiding many emotions and pain. Anger may be redirected to anyone and anything. In the book ‘*On Grief and Grieving*’, Kübler-Ross and Kessler explained that anger does

not have to be logical or valid. There is no limit to the depth of your anger or even to whom or to what it may be directed. Anger may manifest in feelings like resentment and bitterness. It is also true that not everyone will experience this stage, and some may linger on at this stage.

For example- *Where is God at times like these? How can God let this happen to my loved ones? Why didn't he/she take of her health and took precautionary measures seriously? Why did he/she attend the parties or socialize during the pandemic? Why are teachers teaching and evaluating online during a pandemic?*

### **3. Bargaining**

When experiencing grief, we may feel helpless and vulnerable. In moments like this, we make and create frequent *'If only'* or *'what if'* statements. Bargaining has a common wingman that is *'Guilt'*. In bargaining, we create a defence against the emotion of grief. In other words, bargaining postpones the hurt, sadness and confusion. We also observe that religious individuals try to make a deal or promise to God in return for relief from the pain and suffering. A mother who had lost her baby may bargain that her other children remain healthy and safe.

It is important to remember that we do not enter nor exit each stage of grief linearly. We may feel one, then another and may go back again in feeling the first stage.

For example- *If only he/she had gone for the vaccine shot, the condition would not have deteriorated. If only the hospitals had a sufficient supply of facilities. What if I had shifted him/her to another city hospital? If only I had taken the last flight home before the lockdown.*

### **4. Depression**

According to Kübler-Ross (1969), anger and bargaining can make one feel very "active," while depression is like a "quiet" stage of grief. It is when you feel numb, feeling of emptiness, withdrawn from life, and you want to stay in bed all day. In most cases, people do associate depression immediately with grief. If grief is a healing process, then depression is one of the many necessary steps along the way. When we enter this stage of grief, self-care is very vital for healing.

For example- *Having lost him/her, my life has lost meaning, I can never have a normal life after this pandemic, People have lost basic humane*

*values during the pandemic, What's the use of online classes when people are dying all around us.*

## **5. Acceptance**

This last stage of grief is not a happy ending stage with a final endpoint. It does not mean you have forgotten grief and moved past it. Infact, it means that one has accepted to come to terms with grief and understand what it means in our lives now. The “fight or flight” experience will be phased out. Some people reach this stage rapidly, while for others, it may even take years. We know that nothing can replace our loss, but we learn to move, grow and evolve into our new reality. We begin to realize and experience having more good days than bad ones. We begin to live again and seek moments of joy and satisfaction in little things that life has to offer. We start to invest in our relationship with other people; sometimes, we may be swamped with the feeling that we are betraying our lost loved ones, but we live with the loss while rebuilding the structure of our new reality.

*For example- I am so fortunate to have had so many wonderful memories with him/her. Once this pandemic ends, I will find ways to start up my work. I will make full use of online courses to upgrade myself. Having lost my teacher, I will be the best reflection of his teaching and emulate his personality.*

Having discussed the different stages of grief with examples, it is crucial to understand that we have not received any training in helping our students cope with grief, especially death. As teacher educators, we have to realise that the essential qualities for assisting grieving students are good listening skills and the ability to understand where your students are coming from, i.e. their background. And these qualities are a part of life skills that is enhanced by our life experiences. There are research papers (DerSarkissian, 2020; Kastner, 2011; Zisook,2009) that have captured the essence of how to cope with grief; those points will be discussed in the light of the teacher-student relationship. Before that, let us see how grief is perceived at different developmental stages.

## **Grief perception at different developmental stages**

**Toddlers** have an intuitive sense when something is just not right. Even though they do not comprehend what it is, they can read and

observe the expressions and emotions expressed in their immediate environment. Toddler's reactions are sensory, and they do not have sophisticated verbal skills, but they can express grief through their behaviour and play. The common behaviour observed is screaming or crying, clinging to adult, separation anxiety, regressive behaviour-thumb sucking and wetting etc.

**Pre-school** is a natural egocentric stage. They believe that they cause the world to revolve around them. They do not have a cognitive understanding of death. For them, death is abandonment. And their imagination and magical thinking make them believe that they have caused death or can bring them back from the dead. They will repeatedly ask about death, how they miss their loved ones and when are they coming back. The common behaviour observed is similar to that of a toddler, and their main activity to express grief will be accomplished through playing rather than conversing.

**In the elementary stage**, students are concrete thinkers. They begin to develop logical thinking patterns accompanied by enhanced language and cognitive abilities. They are usually enthralled by how our body works and ask straight forward quite graphic, and gory questions. Even though their discussion seems unsettling to us, it is vital to give them honest and simple answers. The students at this stage may manifest behavioural difficulties, poor school performance, depression, withdrawal and other somatic complaints (stomachaches and headache).

Children of six to twelve years want to see death as reversible. They begin to understand the nature of death and worry about their own death. They perceive death as a punishment and associate guilt with death. They blame themselves for their loved ones death. Children at this stage will share their feeling if only they are comfortable with the person. Because of online teaching, students are now very active on social media and may seek help on the web. Parents and teachers have to be vigilant of what is being posted and shared. The common behaviour observed is poor academic performance, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, high-risk behavior and suicidal ideation etc.

Hollingsworth has well expressed **the teen stage** as a stage of '*temporary insanity*'. They experience a great deal of turmoil due to the physical and hormonal changes in their bodies. A grieving teen must

deal with the additional stress of this grieving process. Other symptoms they experience are insomnia, headaches, stomach problems, erratic eating patterns etc. They are confused about how and from whom they can seek support and counsel. A teenager does comprehend death as final and inevitable. This may provoke feelings of despair, helplessness which may increase risk-taking behaviour, substance abuse and suicide ideation in them. We do see teenagers fighting against their vulnerability because they want to be self-reliant. We can assume that a teen can become responsible for the family after the death of one or both parents.

### **Managing grief of students**

Perhaps one of the main legacies from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work is the importance of **listening to the grieving person**. It is also vital to accept it if the grieving person does not want to talk to you. Give him/her time and space. Sometimes we do not know how to reach out to our students, especially during a pandemic. It can be overwhelming for us too. But do not let the fear stop us from lending help or being there for them. Once we adopt an empathetic attitude, the rest will slowly follow.

***Expressing anger creatively***- students can be encouraged to write letters to their loved ones expressing how much they miss them. They can be asked to create a photo album, scrapbook or journal, jotting down how they feel. Teens who are tech-savvy could volunteer to create collages, create a playlist of music that captures the spirit of the departed ones. An online community, discussion forums and blogs can also be used appropriately to express and share their feelings. (Ahmed, 2020). It is crucial for us as teachers and parents to be vigilant that the adolescents do not numb their pain by indulging in substance abuse.

Dr. David Schonfeld, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician of University of Southern California authored the book '*The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide*' in 2010, in which he discussed that **a teacher has to communicate** with the student. *Saying nothing* communicates that you are unaware of their loss. A teacher's silence can also communicate that we as an adult cannot help them to adjust. Firstly, invite the students to share their concern and check on them frequently. We as teachers can **offer them headway and relaxation** when it comes to school work, projects and home assignments. Every

teacher should follow this relaxation not to wait for academic difficulties to become academic failures.

Schonfeld also discussed how the peers may also be afraid to communicate with their grieving classmate and may often distance themselves from them. Some may also take the liberty to make/post insensitive comments, ask sensitive questions repeatedly or even tease the grieving child. In a situation like this, we have to keep a frequent check on the bereaved child. Discuss in class how to start a conversation, make younger children understand death, initiate practical help that they can offer to the bereaved classmates, such as offering support and assistance in schoolwork, projects, lab work, assignments etc. ***Stay connected to the close friends*** of the bereaved student also; sometimes, they might share some valuable insight regarding what their friend is going through.

Teachers and parents can also ***share their feelings and positive coping strategies*** (Ahmed, 2020). Children appreciate when the adults are genuine. The teachers have to be trained to feel comfortable discussing topics like death, afterlife, grief and its various manifestations. With time, teachers can learn how to anticipate common reactions and challenges. How to address these challenges and when to seek help from professionals.

Teachers should ***avoid assumptions and imposing their own beliefs*** on students. They have to be sensitive to the cultural differences of students. Families belonging to different culture have their unique way of expressing grief and honouring the departed souls. ***Communication should be simple and straightforward.*** Especially when dealing with young children, use straightforward words like death, dying or died. Instead of euphemisms such as ‘they are gone to the other world’, ‘he/she passed away’, ‘he/she has departed’. These phrases often are abstract and may be confusing for them to comprehend. During the pandemic, as we are dependent on social media for communication, here also as a teacher, we have to follow the net etiquettes as well as appropriate use of language. The heavy death toll in the second wave of COVID is leaving with only one option that is *to copy and paste* condolences messages to others. Do not let this become just a part of your daily routine. *Sending voice messages* is far better than writing text messages. The way we articulate the words tinted with our emotions is far more effective in communicating our genuine concern and feeling to the bereaved.



***Maintaining a normal routine*** in our classroom (virtual classroom) is helpful for bereaved students to know that there is a routine and structure to their day, which is familiar to them. A routine does not make the teacher insensitive in fact, following routine provides a safety net that is comforting to the grieving child. At the same time, do not be rigid with regard to routine. Give leeway to bereaved students when it comes to school tasks completion. A routine with set limits for students provides a secure and dependable environment. Allowing the grieving students to do anything he/she wants is not helpful. They need adult supervision, and they want someone to tell them, to coax them into doing things.

Teachers and parents also have to be ***careful and sensitive*** to what might 'trigger' the emotions. There will be times when thoughts and feelings associated with their loved ones might come and go in flashes at any time of the day. Interestingly all our five sense organs are in sync when it comes to triggering memories. For example, seeing someone who looks like someone you lost, writing their names when filling a form, hearing a sound/music that they loved to listen to, smelling their favourite perfume/cologne, tasting something that you relished when they made, engaging in activities that you loved to do with them etc.

### **Managing grief at the workplace**

This second wave of the pandemic has hit hard, and we have lost many of our beloved retired, senior teachers and junior colleagues. Some of our colleagues were like a family to us. And each one of us deals with grief differently according to the relationship we have with our colleague. The impact of their death might depend on the age, years of association we had together, prolonged illness, whether it was sudden and the kind of relationship that we established together. Regardless of the reasons, it is crucial to address the unprocessed grief at the workplace. There is no manual offering the life skills to deal with this, nor have we gone under any training in institutions. Unattended and unprocessed grief at the workplace will provoke anxiety and depression at the workplace. If one is grieving, there will be signs of lack of motivation, low morale, a frequent outburst of anger, fatigue, loss of concentration, a manifestation of symptoms of depression etc.

According to Smith (2019), for you to cope up or help your co-worker to cope with grief, it is essential that ***we respect the***

**relationship.** Others may not have had the same relationship that you had with your deceased colleague. Respect this difference and choose conscious and appropriate words to console them.

**Conducting a condolence meeting or memorial service** helps us to talk about our deceased co-workers. All the good and challenging times we shared together. It is ok to laugh, smile and cry in grief. Remember them through the memories that you most want to cherish.

**Providing flexibility at the workplace** can also be helpful for us to grieve. For this, the administrator can make the workplace environment flexible enough for others to cope up with the loss.

Discuss how we as a community can **help the deceased family** if they are in need of any kind of help or assistance. In memory of the co-worker, we can plan to contribute a chapter, newsletter, book, start a scholarship, fundraiser, donate the authored books to the library, plant a tree, posting eulogy (a piece of writing, poem etc.) on the webpage of the institution etc. Centralize on building something positive; this can help perk up low morale and boost motivational levels in the workplace.

The Head of the Department should be informed regarding any difficulty one is facing in adjusting to returning to work. When you are grieving, you will feel distracted and fatigued, don't let it frustrate you. This is part of the grieving process and a normal reaction. The Head of the Department should manifest a great empathetic attitude and empathetic listening qualities. Be observant of the changing ambience of the workplace. **Maintaining a cooperative and nurturing environment** is the responsibility of the Head of the Department.

Maciejewski and Zhang (2007) found that the earliest four stages of grief, namely- denial, anger, bargaining, or depression, had significantly declined by approximately six months post-loss. They also recommended that if an individual continues to experience these four stages of grief beyond six months, they might have to seek professional help. Another study by Zisook and Shear (2009) has published findings that grief is distinctive for every person and for different types of losses. Multiple factors will determine the duration and intensity of one's grief- that is one's pre-existing personality, age, health, number of losses suffered, spirituality, cultural identity, nature/type of relationship, attachment style, etc.

## CONCLUSION

When a person dies, their death leaves a void in the lives of those left behind. Life is never the same again. This does not mean that life can never again be blissful, or the experience of loss cannot be altered into something creative or positive. At the same time, grief does not have a magical ending time. We are all making great efforts to grapple with uncertainty and the unknown. And at the same time confused about our future. There are no “right” or “wrong” ways to grieve, but there can be ‘helpful’ choices and ‘unhelpful/destructive’ choices. Non-judgmental listening helps the bereaved to sort through the options and alternatives they have in hand. Lastly, it is ok to seek help from professionals. Getting professional counselling is a wise thing to do when you are grieving. Having a safe space to talk about your loss will help you move through the stages of grief. Grief, sorrow, hatred, and hardship are compelling and overwhelming emotions. It is not easy to see the good/the silver lining through our tears. The life experiences that the present moment has to offer is our perfect teacher. The only way around this pandemic storm is through it. Emotions that were well under control and on leash are tugging to be free. Let us learn to embrace grief as we make our way through this storm. Remembering and honouring the ones we have lost and holding on to ones we are blessed with.

*“Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found in us.”- Pema Chodron*

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